

The Amchitka Walkouts; Lessons and an Analysis From Two Participants

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The (September 1972) Amchitka upsurge; the phrase we use to describe that largest cross-country outpouring of mass action protest in the new radicalization. An upsurge is a form and pace of social motion that puts all tendencies to the test. Most Ultra-left groupings remained isolated on the side-lines, liberal elements emerged and tried to defuse the upsurge by counter posing things like Saturday rallies to the mass walk-outs that involved tens of thousands of High School youth in direct confrontation with authorities.

The Communist Party played, at least in B.C., a role in the initial anti-Amchitka bomb movement, in the broad coalitions organizing the mass petitioning and letter-writing campaigns. With the swing over to the mobilization of the mass anti-Amchitka bomb sentiment into action in the streets, the CP (*the Stalinist Communist Party of Canada --ed.*) lost its leadership position, to us, the Trotskyist movement. The swing over of the Amchitka protest movement into mass action by High School students in the streets of Vancouver and Victoria and virtually every town in B.C. marked the beginning of the upsurge. Right from the initial stages of this beginning in Vancouver, to the massive Walkouts and Demonstrations that were to take place from coast to coast, right up to the bomb detonation over a month later, the Young Socialists played a decisive central leadership role.

The aim of this contribution is to attempt to condense in as few words as possible some of the most educational experiences, and draw some of the most important lessons. The assimilation by the whole movement of these experiences and a conscious understanding of the lessons we can learn from the upsurge helps us to be collectively ready for the many upsurges to come, as Capitalism decays, the radicalization deepens and the Class struggle sharpens.

Most comrades have not had the opportunity to learn the full scope and time span of the Amchitka upsurge. What follows is a factual breakdown of significant events in chronological order, primarily focusing on Alberta and B.C.

Objective Conditions Leading Up To The Upsurge *(a report from Vancouver)*

The overwhelming majority of British Columbians were against the detonation of the Amchitka Bomb. In September, as the B.C population learned more about the bomb, and as they came to realize that Amchitka was parallel to Prince George, and on the San Andreas fault, their broad, amorphous, pacifist opposition deepened with growing anxiety, fear and disbelief that such chances would be taken. This produced anger in broad layers of the population. The mass media was full of news in relation to the bomb and the growing opposition.

A group of militant liberals organized a sensational protest action in the form of setting sail a fishing vessel (GREENPEACE) for Amchitka in an attempt to frustrate the U.S. military, and gain publicity for the opposition to the bomb. GREENPEACE was a liberal opposition (with considerable impact and imagination we might add) in the Amchitka movement. The liberals can often be effective publicists. But they had no

effective strategy to carry the struggle into massive mobilizations. And moreover the GREENPEACE crew were led by people who had had some experience participating in the Anti-War movement. These elements particularly centered their fire on the inactivity of Trudeau and pointed to its source -- the complicity of Canadian Imperialism in the world inter-imperialist military alliance structure and the role of the Canadian government in Vietnam. This helps clarify the fact that besides ourselves others **did** raise Canadian complicity and we had considerable influence on them. Actually our Anti-War work had helped educate the liberals and thus helped build the Amchitka movement too.

A large coalition was formed to co-ordinate the channeling of opposition into a mass petition and letter writing campaign. Around 30 different groups, including the CP, Ecology groups, Church groups, and Trade Unions made up this anti-mass action coalition. The petitions were circulated extremely widely through all the secondary schools, in many cases sponsored by the Student Councils.

At this time the YS in Vancouver was gearing up for the Fall Anti-*(Vietnam)* War campaigns. We saw Amchitka as primarily a liberalish type issue and not something we had the cadre to spare for, in light of our priorities.

However as the intensity of feeling grew in the High Schools our High School comrades came to the sudden realization that something of enormous potential was growing. We realized that although the present leadership of the Amchitka movement was liberal, the potential dynamic went far beyond. We realized the YS had a decisive leadership role to play in mobilizing students into motion, and that mass action against the war-maker's bomb under Amchitka was in no way a contradiction to our priorities and in fact opened up increased new possibilities.

The High School comrades came to this new assessment on September 22. The bomb was to go off same time in the next week or so. Within hours, after key decisions with executive comrades and the Organizer, the High School Fraction met, and after long discussion passed a motion to immediately begin a call for city-wide walkouts on Sept 30th, 8 days away. This process shows how comrades in a situation are strengthened and pulled together by the vanguard organization and its more experienced comrades. It shows also that those in "the field" have much to gain from those in "the apparatus." It cuts across the misconception that those in the field always know best, that they are always more militant than the apparachniks who are supposedly out of touch and therefore behind and somewhat conservative. We then set to work at drawing in the necessary forces to pull it off (as many Student Council types as possible, independent elements in other schools etc.)

Our analysis of the mood of High School youth for action was quickly confirmed. Within 48 hours of our decision the following events had taken place. Due to YS intervention, 3 (typical type) Student Councils were backing the call for city-wide walkouts. At one school, New Westminster Secondary, the president, who had been elected in opposition the YS candidate, canceled an appointment with the mayor in order to call the emergency Council meeting to discuss the YS proposal. At David Thompson Secondary the comrade with the help of the Council President managed to get a referendum circulated asking the student body to vote on the proposal, before the administration could block it; the vote was taken 93% in favour.

On Friday the U.B.C. (*University*) council mobilized a demonstration of 3,000 along the U.S. border. The action was organized by the Human Government, a weird

combination of liberals and ultra-lefts who had no strategy and no perspective. They did not see their action as making links with other sectors of the community, as part of a series of actions to build a movement. It was a single shot action. They wrote articles in the *UBYSSEY (UBC campus student newspaper)* talking about the futility of the action and this helps explain why the initiative passed so utterly and completely out of the University hands into High School students' hands. This is not to say that the High School students would not have played a powerful and independent role anyway. But an effective University-High School student alliance from the outset would have strengthened and deepened the movement. Hundreds of High School students walked out to attend. However, it wasn't this protest that was splashed across the front page of the paper that evening. Much to our astonishment, we learned that hundreds of students at a Junior High had walked out, en masse, and headed for the U.S. consulate many miles away. On their way they pulled out students from 3 more schools, swelling their ranks to an estimated 1200. The vanguard role in terms of militancy and numbers of Junior High Schoolers was overwhelming.

Clearly the upsurge was beginning. In the sleepless week that followed the comrades of the High School fraction were on the front line of crucial battles and events, School Board maneuvers, with their walk-out cancellations, police with their permits, liberals with their Russian Nuclear test, ultra-lefts with their red-baiting, weather, bomb detonation postponements, lack of clarity in our ranks as to how to make maximum gain for the anti-war movement, homework exhaustion, and hundreds of other factors added to the pressures. At times, carrying the upsurge forward seemed like riding a surf board on the crest of a tidal wave.

The details of the most important struggles leading up to October 6th can be read about in the October '71 *Young Socialist*. (*This issue not available .*) See ***YS/LJS & LSA journal coverage below***)*

I think comrades who have not yet had opportunity to participate in actual Walkouts on the scale they occurred throughout B.C. may appreciate a brief description of the experience.

In co-ordinating the Walkouts, the Walkout Committee, through the leadership of the YS, proposed and publicized a series of routes and times for the Walk-outs and marches to the Consulate from every corner of the lower mainland, and they worked.

Preparations and publicity methods inside the schools varied. In some schools actual Walkout Committees formed in other schools organizers came together on an informal basis.

In schools where the Administration attempted to block the Walkouts the students had no access to the P.A. (*public address*) system; in some schools a sort of dual power situation emerged briefly as both the Administration and the Student Council came over the P.A. system urging opposite responses from the student body. Blackboard announcements, left up by sympathetic Teachers and word-of-mouth constituted the basic publicity format. The word-of-mouth method circulated like an electric current.

On the morning of the scheduled Walkouts, Organizers could be seen in schools throughout Vancouver and surrounding areas marching through the halls, bull horns under their arms. In just about all the Junior and Senior high schools the student body response was overwhelming. In some schools when the time for the walkout came the

administration, powerless, just disappeared, leaving the Walkout Organizers the undisputed leadership of the students.

In many schools, they (*those opposed*) tried to play a middle of the road role. And in still other schools, the naive reactionaries declared war on the upsurge and tried to put the lid on it by locking doors and threatening expulsions. In one such Junior High, Junior High students from other schools surrounded it, demanding they release the students inside; in this case as in others many students poured out through the windows. Having talked to many elementary students since it has become apparent that the only reason the elementary schools did not walkout en masse was this type of intensified repression, locked doors etc.

Thousands upon thousands of students marched incredible distances -- some 5 or 10 miles to reach the U.S. consulate or the U.S. border. Despite the tiring march and the risks they were taking in defying the authorities by walking out, the militancy and spirit of the marchers remained incredibly high. Anti-bomb chants and anti-Nixon songs roared and echoed through all areas of the city.

The secondary school population is divided into a multitude of separate school buildings. Through sports competition and other forms youth are encouraged to see the students of the other schools as their rivals. Those divisions were wiped away and replaced by a joyous solidarity.

Comrades recall the experience of leading about 3,000 South Side and East Side students westward, to the consulate. As they marched through the Downtown streets they met another column of about 3,000 students from the North shore. The reaction of both groups as they met was thunderous cheers and a sea of fists clenched above their heads.

When all of the long human snakes met at the Consulate our numbers had swelled to at least 12,000.

Anti-imperialist sentiment and Canadian nationalism:

It was blatantly evident that the overwhelming majority of the participants felt a gut fury and hatred towards the U.S. establishment which was arrogantly threatening our environment. This was reflected in the anti-Nixon signs and songs, and in the tumultuous response to the anti-imperialist thrust of many of the speakers comments (including the High School comrade that spoke for the Anti-War movement). First of all we should look at what anti-imperialism is. It is not just opposition to a bomb test by an imperialist power. It is not even opposition to the Vietnam War. Many who opposed the bomb also oppose Soviet testing which indicates (that) their opposition is pacifist in character and filled with illusions. Many who opposed Amchitka did so because of factors mentioned earlier. It was a massive test and vivid description of its effects were widely known. A similar test by the Soviets on Amchitka might very well have called forth a response just as massive. Here again the response does not reveal a conscious anti-U.S. IMPERIALIST sentiment -- but a fear of life and health and an anger that ANYBODY would detonate a 6-megaton bomb (or whatever size it was) on Amchitka.

What is anti-imperialism? It means against or in opposition to imperialism -- right? But that necessarily implies that those who are anti-imperialist know first of all what imperialism is. We know that as Lenin put it: "if it were necessary to give the briefest possible definition of imperialism we should have to say that imperialism is the monopoly stage of capitalism." ("Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism",

Selected Works Moscow 1967 p. 745) But how many Amchitka protestors even suspect that imperialism is in fact capitalism itself at its highest stage -- that to be anti-imperialist especially in Canada where monopoly capital reigns supreme one would of necessity be anti-Canadian imperialism and pro Quebec self-determination.

Anti-imperialism is a highly conscious outlook and quite precise. It is by no means necessary that to be opposed to one imperialist war or bomb test you are anti-imperialist. A consistent anti-imperialist supports nuclear weapons for the U.S.S.R.: a consistent anti-imperialist opposes Canadian imperialism in Quebec. Many who oppose the Vietnam war hold neither of these positions and still others would actually SUPPORT imperialist intervention in the Middle East on the side of Israel. Yes, there was anti-Nixon anger. There was also simple fear, pacifism, pro-ecology feeling etc. We could get into the relatively fruitless aspect that the protests were "objectively" anti-imperialist but that doesn't move us even one step closer to an understanding of the CONSCIOUSNESS of the anti-bomb protestors.

Some of this was channeled into a Canadian Nationalist form. A couple of students held up the flag of Canada etc.

Most comrades have heard about how the rally concluded with the singing of "Oh Canada". A closer look is interesting. There was a bit of debate among the organizers on the speakers platform as to whether or not it should be sung. Many of the speakers had also talked about Canada's complicity.

The chairperson, a comrade, and half the leaders present were opposed while the two co-chairpersons, (one a liberal and one an ultraleft) were in favour. They wanted the folk (singer) Vera Johnson to lead it. She refused and instead sang her own version which went along the lines of "Canada: 104 years of oppression" and "I hope some day we'll be the true north strong and free like the song says we're supposed to be".

Finally however the anthem was sung. The comrade chairperson kept his mouth shut and raised his fist, and soon the 12,000 high schoolers raised their fists as they sang. What a sight! Definitely the anthem was not being sung in the mood the ruling class would like it sung. This incident should not be viewed as a turn towards right-wing patriotism by the masses of youth, but more as a reflection of their elementary level of consciousness (emphasis by the Web Ed.)

The presence of Canadian nationalism in the actions is in fact a clear proof that the Amchitka action was not in fact a conscious anti-imperialist protest. To be against imperialism (Canadian monopoly capitalism) you obviously have to reject support for the Canadian nation state, its anthems and emblems etc. That is why the nervousness and embarrassment of our comrades was entirely justified BECAUSE WE ARE CONSCIOUS ANTI-IMPERIALISTS. The presence of Canadian nationalism was the backside of the protest. We did not and could not support it. But we knew as Trotsky writes in the "Transitional Program": "in the pacifism and even patriotism of the oppressed, there are ELEMENTS which reflect on one hand a hatred of destructive war, and the other a clinging to WHAT THEY BELIEVE to be their own good elements which we must know how to seize upon in order to draw the requisite conclusions." Note carefully that Trotsky does not say here in any way shape or form that we SUPPORT the pacifism or patriotism of the oppressed. It is as he points out earlier a confused expression of their interest. We look for the solid class elements in it and "seize upon" them to carry the movement forward.

The singing of "Oh Canada" and the carrying of Canadian flags does not make the ruling class nervous because it signifies that the LEVEL OF CONSCIOUSNESS of the protest is still entirely within the framework of their bourgeois nation-state. The level of consciousness allowed all sorts of Canadian nationalist elements to be reflected, but these did not amount to much. What they fear is the independent mass self-expression, mass action through which the oppressed gain awareness of their size and numbers and power and from this comes self confidence — the insolence of revolutionary masses. The truly awesome thing about the High School walkout was its militancy, its massive, truly massive character -- not the flags and not "Oh Canada." It was the escape from the schools, the coming together, the awareness of massive solidarity that broke down the fear, alienation, etc. born of school repression. It was us and other conscious politicals who brought anti-imperialism to that action -- that is our role, and to direct it in an anti-capitalist direction against our own Canadian Ruling class.

It should be noted here that although this demonstration of 12,000 High School students was the largest of the entire Amchitka upsurge in the country, that on the dates of the Walkouts we learned that massive demonstrations occurred also throughout just about every imaginable little town in the whole province. The same type of thing occurred in Alberta later on.

Although we had no direct contact, students had heard about the Walkout calls on T.V., radio, in the paper, and had set to work organizing their own. It is impossible to estimate how many thousands were involved in total throughout the province.

Campus comrades felt they could not pull out the Campuses for the Oct.6th action. But the example of the Oct.6th action and the intensified feeling of urgency made it possible to mobilize on Campus for Nov.3rd.

The Oct.6th action started the upsurge snowballing across the country. The High School Walkout Committee initiated the call for mass Walkouts and Demonstrations across Canada on Nov.3rd. This call was sent through the mail to as many High Schools and Campuses as possible. Representatives of the Walkout Committee were also flown to Ontario and Alberta to help gain momentum for the proposal. A high school representative intervened in the big coalition and was key in bringing the coalition to support mass action on Nov.3rd. United Press International carried the news of Oct.6th around the world, and soon NPAC was including Amchitka as one of the key issues for their Nov. 3rd and 6th actions.

With the support of UBC and SFU (*Simon Fraser U., Burnaby*) Student Councils, acting under YS leadership, and the Ontario Anti-War movement etc, the call for Nov.3rd actions took hold everywhere and it was the Nov. 3rd date that most comrades think of as the culminating point in the upsurge. The only place where it was somewhat anti-climactic was Vancouver. Icy rains understandably dampened the response. Despite the rains several thousand came out, many of the Secondary students again marching up to 10 miles through the rain. The rally was extremely successful, although several Yippie and Maoist type ultra-left Campus students managed to lead a large portion off on a traffic blocking spree afterwards.

In Victoria, around 5,000 students, mainly High School youth walked out, despite similar weather. There as elsewhere, the YS played a crucial leadership role. The High School walk-out committee served as a base for a breakthrough in launching the Anti-War movement there. Books could be written on all the lessons that should be learned from our Movement's experience with Amchitka.

In fact many books have been written, because many of the lessons were in fact confirmations in life today of many things Revolutionary Socialists have learned from struggles in the past. They confirm many things the YS has been saying for years.

Lessons of the upsurge:

We saw confirmed for example the capacity of organized labor for political action through downing tools. And we saw confirmed the inspirational sparking role that students can play in setting the working class into motion. There is no space here to detail some of the experiences of the labor shut-down except to say that, although they lasted ostensibly for only 30 minutes or so, they took place on a much larger scale than the High School walkouts, occurred throughout the Whole Province, and were every bit as militant in many cases, as the student actions. (In one B.C. town for example several thousand workers cheered as Nixon was burned in effigy).

We saw confirmed that the student movement, far from dead, was capable of action on a scale never before seen. In fact we saw how the radicalization was deepening. A few years ago, a radicalization started to grow on the campuses like the uppermost leaves of a tree catching the first of a spring breeze. Although there has been a lull as of late on the Campuses, the radicalization, as was blatantly demonstrated by the cross-country High School walk-outs and other localized struggles over the past year, has now caught hold in the High Schools, and Junior High Schools, where 2,000,000 of the youth of Canada and Quebec are imprisoned, most of the year.

One lesson we must assimilate is that, although we were able to play a leadership role in the walkouts and other struggles that have occurred, our base is still extremely small. Recruitment from the High Schools and the education and training of these recruits is of considerable urgency. Why did we not recruit out of Amchitka? Through our negative lesson in this respect, we can say that the movement has to be in times of upsurge, **immensely conscious** of recruitment. And that also when the peak is reached and the upsurge recedes, we have to make the super-human effort to not collapse from exhaustion but to keep going full steam ahead temporarily, directing our time and energy to consolidating forces and recruiting, and only when we've done our best to reap the potential while it's still there — can we gear down.

We work to orient the various mass campaigns such as the Anti-War and Abortion Repeal movements, to the High Schools, in order to facilitate the growth of these movements through the potential mass action base that is there. The explosiveness of the Cutback situation has been shown, but it is already clear that the cutbacks are far from a Post-Secondary alone occurrence. Over the last 2 years massive Cutbacks have begun to be implemented in the Secondary and Elementary School systems in several Provinces. As many of the Campus cutbacks are in the realm of entrance requirements and tuition hikes these are also of direct concern to High School students. The anti-Cutback High School walkouts in Peterborough and Toronto are a vindication of the volatility of this issue.

One of the key lessons for our movement is that **it proved in life** that it can intervene in and lead a massive student upsurge filled with all kinds of "pacifism and even patriotism" without ever once bending to nationalism, or pacifism; but on the contrary resisting it, posing Canadian imperialist complicity as our enemy. We understood how to seize upon the good elements and draw the requisite conclusions.

Above all we should learn to grasp the intimate relationship between the objective conditions and the subjective intervention of a revolutionary leadership in carrying a movement to its full potential. On one hand we don't create the objective conditions, and to call "Walkout!" when the tide isn't going the right way is pure folly and will lead to isolation. On the other hand, as we can see from Amchitka, there is no substitute for a conscious experienced democratic centralist movement and its decisive team intervention when the time is ripe.

Web Ed. note: see LSA journal coverage: **W16a Anti-War Movement -- 1971):*

W16a-1971-LC#41-Oct 11-2a: Stop Amchitka bomb test!

W16a-1971-LC#41-Oct 11-2bx: Students lead protest against U.S. (atom) bomb test

W16a-1971-LC#42-Oct 25: Protest the war on Nov. 3, 6 Photo: Students protest

W16a-1971 LC#43-1a: Stop Amchitka! Stop the war! (Toronto -- US Consulate)

W16a-1971-LC#43-1b: Break from NATO, NORAD, ICC! (Halifax actions)

W16a-1971-LC#43-2a: Ottawa blessed US aggression in Vietnam and Amchitka

W16a-1971-LC#43-2b: Minister Sharp's "firm response" to US President

W16a-1971-LC#44-1: Why Amchitka? (Young Socialist Toronto rally)

W16a-1971-LC#44-2: B.C. labor stoppage a first for on-job political action

W16a-1971-LC#44-3a: Amchitka upsurge reveals force of anti-U.S. sentiment

W16a-1971-LC#44-3b: B.C. labor calls for "Shutdown for Survival"

Photos: Radicalization deepens; Students major force

W16a-1971-LC#44-4: New layers of population drawn into Amchitka protest

W16a-1971- YS: Amchitka walk-outs: the full story

Stop Amchitka, Stop the war!

B.C. labor stops work in protest

labor Challenge

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Part of the anti-Amchitka rally of 8,000 in Toronto massed in front of U.S. consulate.

NOV. 3 — Across Canada, hundreds of thousands of people are mobilizing in opposition to the impending U.S. nuclear explosion at Amchitka Island.

Particularly impressive are the whole new layers of students and workers who have played a leading role in the protests.

Many of them have linked their opposition to the Amchitka blast with a protest against the continuing U.S. aggression in Southeast Asia and the Canadian government's complicity in the war.

In the past two days, massive marches have been held in all the major cities.

In Vancouver today, 6,000 — mainly students — braved a freezing, drenching rain to rally at the U.S. consulate while an estimated 50-60,000 workers across the province downed tools for 30 minutes in a "Shutdown for Survival" initiated by the B.C. Federation of Labor. It was the first such work stoppage for a political protest since the strike against war in 1919.

In Toronto, the Ontario Federation of Labor convention adjourned while the 1,200 delegates marched on the U.S. consulate. A second demonstration at the consulate drew over 8,000 students later in the afternoon.

In Victoria, 4,000 participated in an anti-Amchitka rally organized by the recently-formed Student Amchitka Anti-war Committee. They were addressed by B.C. NDP leader Dave Barrett and representative of the anti-war movement and the Young Socialists.

In Saskatoon, between 3,000 and 5,000 demonstrated — about 3 percent of the city's total population.

Featured speaker at the Regina rally at the legislature was NDP premier Allan Blakeney.

In Winnipeg, close to 3,000 surrounded the U.S. consulate Nov. 2 in a rally sponsored by the students' councils of the two universities.

In Edmonton hundreds of students cut classes and demonstrated. In Guelph, Ont. over 1,000 participated in a teach-in at the university. Thousands of students demonstrated at various border crossings.

While the Amchitka blast was the main target of the protests, in many instances, speakers and demonstrators have linked Nixon's arrogant flaunting of public opinion in proceeding with the test, with Washington's war of aggression in Southeast Asia. A recurrent theme was "Stop Amchitka — Stop the War!" The demonstrations coincide with the Nov. 3